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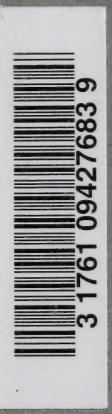
The Meaning of the War

FOR LABOUR—FREEDOM—COUNTRY



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

BY

FREDERIC HARRISON

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THE MEANING OF THE WAR*

FOR LABOUR—FREEDOM—COUNTRY

WHY—for whom—for what are we at war? We are fighting first for our existence as a great nation—then to do our bounden duty to our Allies—lastly to rescue Europe from submission to a despot.

It has come now to this, that our very existence as a great and prosperous nation is at stake. The *immediate occasion* of our engaging in war was the call of honour to help a friendly people to whom we were pledged by treaties of old standing. We were bound to save a small nation which faces our shore from absorption by a ruthless conqueror. But the *final necessity* for our fighting now to the last man is this—that, if the German hosts do in the end crush the Allies—then Britain will cease to be a free, proud, thriving nation. She would sink through incalculable sufferings to ruin, starvation, and subjection.

For nine centuries we Englishmen have never known what is meant by conquest. We cannot believe that an enemy could ever trample over our lands, bombard our open towns, burn our homes, shoot peaceful citizens, and put us under a monstrous

* *Note.*—This pamphlet was written for the Victoria League. Special terms may be obtained, on application to the Publishers, for copies intended for distribution.

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tribute of money, men, and ships. That perhaps is not near us even now. We mock at their threats of invasion. Yet, nevertheless, defeat of the Allies in the present war would mean to these islands ruin beyond imagination for generations to come. There are still some who say—"Oh! we shall worry through all right! No Germans can cross the Channel!" I will try to show them how the ruin may come even though our shores be unassailed. And I say that, since the years just before Trafalgar, Britain has never been so near a tremendous catastrophe as it is this day.

If we are fighting across the seas, as we did in Spain and in Belgium a hundred years ago, it is quite as much for ourselves as it is for France or for Belgium—and so it was then. To-day the freedom and prosperity of Britain is bound up with that of France. If we suffered France to be crushed before our eyes, the German, who has sworn to blot France out of Europe, would tear away her colonies, her ships, her Channel ports, her coast and seaboard land—say from the mouth of the Seine to the Rhine. With that, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, if not formally annexed, would be for aggressive uses under German control.

When the mighty German Empire, soon to be increased to a population double our own, is master of the whole seaboard of North Europe from Havre to Hamburg—a coast more fitted for navies than is our own coast between Dover and Aberdeen, when their aeroplane and Zeppelin stations look across the Channel from a dozen headlands, and the mouths of great tidal rivers gape upon our shores, and behind these fortresses and docks there lies in wait a mighty nation having a fleet then larger than ours, and armies of three or four millions of men—would the flag of Britain float quietly at ease?

Even then we would hope to keep the invader from our shores. Yes! but where would be our overseas Empire—our commercial credit, our world-wide trade, our food imported from distant regions? We should be fighting for our lives at home with a gigantic enemy who had made himself master of Europe from the Baltic to the Adriatic. We might still be what Holland has become ever since she lost command of the sea. But Great Britain such as we know it to-day would be but thrilling pages of ancient history.

I will try to show why defeat in a great war with a ruthless rival would be more fatal to Britain than it would be to Germany herself, to Russia, or even to France.

When Germany is defeated, she will still remain a great country, whatever the sufferings of her sorely-tried people. She will still hold a grand Fatherland, a most industrious, brave, and able race, well gifted to restore her as it did after Jena. She can practically supply her own food; she has all the resources of a mighty nation within herself. All this is true of Russia, and in a way, is true of France. It is impossible that Germany, or Russia, or France could be reduced from being a great nation to be a small nation.

But this might happen to Britain if she were crushed by an overwhelming rival, even without invading our soil. Our food, our industries, our commerce, our credit, our whole national existence rest upon the world outside. They cannot live or thrive within the narrow limits of these islands. Our small acres cannot feed our overgrown population; and we cannot buy foreign foodstuff unless we can sell our products overseas. To an enemy triumphant and dominant in Europe, there would pass our command of the seas, for our navies must

be concentrated to protect our coast. Our imported food would be heavily taxed, hindered, and reduced. Our manufactures would pass to alien markets. Our financial primacy would pass to Berlin or New York. Our trade would shrink to home waters. Over our whole industry would lie the burden of a war indemnity—say thrice the amount of our own National Debt. Great Britain would subside into the exhaustion of Venice and of Holland when their overseas Empires were torn from them.

Let those who used to gibe at diplomacy and cry out against armaments consider how our manufacturing population is to be employed when half our exports are gone—how our crowded cities are to be fed when ten millions of our workmen are out of work and the quartern loaf is at a shilling—how are our industries to be started when the banks are bankrupt and the Exchequer has to find interest on a war indemnity of two thousand million sterling. This assuredly will be the fate of this small island if the huge German Alliance can establish the domination it seeks from the North Sea to the Mediterranean across all Central Europe.

For a hundred years now, since the first Napoleon, in spite of many a quarrel, we have had peace with France and have enjoyed immense advantages from the genius, the inspiration, the republican life of our gallant neighbour. With France crushed under the hoof of the Uhlan's horse, not only should we be confronted with the visible peril of sharing her fate but we should lose all that is most close to our heart in the progressive life of Europe—in its science, its art, its literature, and its ideals. We should exchange for it the Satanic Gospel of "military necessity," "the dominion of the strongest." Can we suffer the social fraternity of French and British Labour to be crushed down to the servile discipline

of the Prussian drill-sergeant, until republican freedom be absorbed in "Blood and Iron"?

In this tremendous battle of the Future against the Past—and for forty years I have been calling out to our people to be prepared for it—my main thought is for the interest of the masses who labour. To them, the overthrow of our maritime and military system in a gigantic war in Europe must bring ruin as awful as anything recorded in the history of the world. Let no one of the industrial order, be he capitalist or workman, fancy that this is like our too many wars beyond seas, even the Crimean war of sixty years ago. It is war at home, under our eyes, in our most vital parts. To Labour especially, it means all that is most terrible in human misery. We are at war to-day for our honour, for our homes, for the future of civilisation, freedom, and peace.

These are words that no serious politician will lightly use; but they are used now by Ministers who in all our modern history have gone farthest in a desire to satisfy popular aims and wants. For myself, my whole public life for fifty years has been devoted to the popular cause. In spite of abuse, all these years I have fought against militarism, Imperialist aggression, and international adventures. I may claim to have been in the front line of the Old Guard who stood for Peace instead of Glory, for Social Progress against territorial expansion. But now that the crisis so long foreseen is upon us I say to the workmen, to the young, to the strong, to the true-hearted all round—Arm, toil, endure, fight if you care to save our country from an unutterable catastrophe.

Remember, this is the most awful orgy of destruction that has occurred in the history of the world. It is no war of rival kings, of ambitious ministers

trusting to snatch a province or two from a neighbouring State. It is no war of weeks, or even of months, to be settled in a friendly way by a fair treaty of peace and compromise. It is a war to decide if Europe—if modern civilisation—shall be ruled by brute Force or by the enlightened will of free peoples. The war began with a series of insolent summonses to three small nations to submit or suffer the extremities of conquest. It was defended in the German Parliament as a frank defiance of morality, treaties, and the Laws of Nations. It has been waged with ruthless savagery such as Europe has not seen since the Dark Ages, by every form of mendacity, treachery, and terrorism. It avows mendacity, treachery, and terrorism to be its systematic engines of warfare. Its codes of "military necessity" are the old watchwords of banditti and Pirates. It is seeking to impose on humanity a new Gospel in the maxim—Might is Right.

Do not think it impossible that a noble people, as are the Germans still, could be so perverted and poisoned. It is too true that their Sovereign, and a host of his military and civil officers, have drummed it into them as a duty of loyalty and patriotism, and have taught it to them and proclaimed it in speeches, books, and journals for years past. Good people at home would not believe it to be serious, even when the Kaiser told his soldiers in war to behave like Huns, and a famous general wrote books to prove that war was the school of all the virtues and the business of a great nation. The docile German has been misled by the dynasty and that caste of military nobles whom they have too long endured. Trust to us who know Germans at home, who speak their tongue, read their writings, and have friends, even relatives, amongst them. We know them. And we know that their magnificent courage, resources,

intellect are being called up once for all, not merely to win victories, to carry home more milliards—but to destroy the British Empire, to win from it the command of the seas, our colonies, our trade, to domineer as masters of Europe, and what is worst of all, to establish the new Gospel that the kingdom of this world shall belong as of right, by a law of nature, to the strongest and the most unscrupulous.

It is the most tremendous and the most inhuman undertaking ever attempted in Europe, for even Napoleon's Empire had some appeal to Liberty against Feudalism, and brought in real elements of popular advancement. The war of Pan-German ambition is more like the flood of barbarous hordes which in Asia and in Europe brought desolation over prosperous and peaceful lands. In any case, it is a world struggle of Civilisation against Reaction.

It will not—it cannot—it shall not succeed. But the effort to defeat it will be terrible, sanguinary, cruel, and prolonged. Still, we foresee victory. —and much that is to come after victory. The nations which have been despoiled in these last fifty years, the peoples who have been torn from their own race, shall have free voice to decide under what rule they prefer to live. Alsace, Lorraine, will vote on their own destinies. The Danes of Schleswig-Holstein shall be free to return to their fatherland if they wish it. The Tsar has pledged himself to restore Poland as a Home-Rule land, and Europe must see that he keeps this pledge. The monstrous slave-State called the Austrian Dual Empire will dissolve into its national units. The near East will be freed from the greed of huge Empires, and the Far East will become Asiatic again. If the military crew which has seized power in Constantinople ventures to throw in its lot with its evil spirit in Berlin, the Turk will for ever quit Europe, and

indeed the Levantine coasts. Heligoland and the Kiel Canal will never again threaten Britain and force us to maintain an immense and unneeded fleet. And, if the armies of Germany, of Austria, of Russia, and of France are by international conventions and European law reduced to moderate proportions, the blood-tax will be taken off the nations of the world. The peaceful union of a European confederation may begin to be a reality, and at last the progress of civilisation may advance in security, free from the nightmare of perpetual expectation of War.

It is a prospect, certain, blessed, real, but far from near us as yet. To reach it to-day we must be ready for every sacrifice—to offer up our last youth, our last shilling, every thought of rest. I shall not live to see it, but I shall die in the conviction that it is to come.

FREDERIC HARRISON.

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